

Going from Admin to Executive Assistant

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If you're effective and execute work flawlessly with integrity and style, you might want to contact someone like Melba Duncan.

Duncan, founder of the Duncan Group, specializes in finding top-notch assistants for top-level executives. As such, she helps her clients find admins with the leadership, team-building and management skills to fill the elite role of "executive management assistant" (a term she uses to distinguish between the often-overused "executive assistant").

Another reason you may need Duncan's help: "This is one of the most difficult jobs to put on paper," says Duncan, author of *The New Executive Assistant* (McGraw-Hill). Most of the key skills necessary for executive management assistant positions don't show up on a mechanical résumé and are impossible to detail in a job description, Duncan says.

Duncan asks candidates to write a narrative "professional summary" showing the stepladder of their career. Here's what she's seeking:

Broad skills. Problem-solving strategies, integrity, flexibility and the ability to stay calm under fire.

Growth. Where you began, what you acquired along the way and how you put that to use later.

Interpersonal skills and emotional resilience. Etiquette, finesse and discretion. Also a great sense of humor, recognizing that things may not be funny as you're going through them but may be hysterical on the way home. (Duncan recalls the time when, as an executive assistant, she sent her boss in black tie to a function that wasn't that formal.)

Creative thinking. Are you a risk-taker? Are you the type of assistant who will try to stop the plane from taking off until your late-arriving boss boards it?

How do you stack up?

If a candidate falls short, Duncan says, it's often in areas such as appearance, manner, style or discretion.

An executive assistant needs “impeccable social skills” and the ability to manage any situation, so how that person presents himself or herself to Duncan and her staff is crucial. For example:

- Does your appearance reflect a belief that you’re a professional? “You have to want to do this work to do it well,” Duncan says, not just pick up a paycheck until “something better comes along.”
- Do you have strong social skills? How do you greet the receptionist? Instead of grabbing any seat in a conference room, do you wait to be offered one or ask whether the other person has a preference for where you should sit?
- Do you exercise discretion? Can you discuss your preferences for a work environment without revealing too much personal information about your colleagues in previous positions?
- Are you gracious, putting others at ease and allowing them to save face in difficult situations? You also should be able to talk to anyone about any subject. A basic test: whether you can discuss the topics on the front page of *The New York Times*.

And, of course, you must have an “extraordinarily positive attitude” about yourself and the work you do, Duncan says.

Her formula for success: Your attitude + your vocabulary = your reality.

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